

BEING SIDELINED IN THE BILLOWING SAND: AN ANALYSIS OF BENYAMIN'S *GOAT DAYS* AND KAMAL'S *GADDAMA*

ANUPRIYA P B
Freelance Research
Pachikkara House
Malakkallu P O
Kasaragod
Kerala
671532

Abstract:

This work aims to shed light on 'othering' faced by labour migrants who travel from India, especially Kerala to gulf countries in search of employment and monetary avenues. The most powerful oil kingdom has an attitude of belligerence towards diasporic workers. This paper tries to substantiate this fact through analysis of Benyamin's novel Goat days and Kamal's movie Gaddama. The indentured labour in which they engage is actually a replacement of slavery. Along with the exposure to a different language and culture, they also encounter brutal subjugation and savagery under Arab masters. By analysing these works, the paper delineate master- slave relationship, alienation, loss of identity, nostalgia, human right violation, longing for liberation etc. faced by migrant labourers in the sea of sand.

Keywords: *Diaspora, othering, expatriate, identity crisis*

"In recent years diaspora is used as a cover term to include all kinds of people exiles, expatriates and immigrants who live in other countries away from home. Diasporans are torn between two worlds. They face two cultures, two languages, two countries and remain suspended between them" (Das 415). "Terms like 'marginality', 'subaltern', 'expatriate', 'diaspora', 'the other' to refer to the marginalised or the colonised" (359). People migrate from one nation to other for many reasons. Some people are exiled. Some migrate due to unemployment and poverty. Some migrate to absorb new experiences.

Gulf is a place which pulls Keralites since dreams began to be sold. It is difficult to find a family in Kerala that do not have any gulf expatriates. These migrations have helped many struggling families to attain a better status in life. But there are a lot many instances of reverse happenings of migrant labourers being othered in the oil kingdom. Gaddama and Goat days open before us a terrible plight encountered by our dear ones in the land from which Kerala drains its energy to live. The gulf countries have not colonized our country India. But their attitude towards foreign migrant workers is just like the attitude of colonial masters towards colonized subjects. They are considered inferior in knowledge and culture. They are recognized as the 'other'. Othering is a process that goes beyond mere scapegoating and denigration. It denies the 'other' those defining characteristics of the same reason, dignity, love, pride and ultimately any entitlement to human rights. The expatriates who move to gulf countries in the name of bonded labour are treated as slaves by the Arab masters. Though slavery is abolished, it still prevails concealed under the title indenture labour. The pathetic situation endured by migrant labourers are portrayed vividly in both *Goat days* and *Gaddama*.

Najeeb's story is that of a Malayalee labourer, a sand miner by trade, held captive in Saudi desert by his Arbab for three years, four months, nine days. Forced to look after goats, sheep and camels Najeeb is not paid for his services. Najeeb and his companion Hakeem are trafficked from Riyadh airport by an Arab. They mistake him as their real Arbab, the visible God who would fulfil all their ambitions. Najeeb says: "Arbab-at that moment I could not have liked any other word more!" (Benyamin 48). But that exaggeration does not last long. He is taken into a goat farm (masara) in the middle of desert which is a small shed that do not even have a place to sit or lay down. He recognizes that his dreams are so far from the reality of his situation. The scary figure whom he meets there petrifies him. "He had matted hair like that of a savage who had been living in a forest for years" (Benyamin 61). The entire features of the scary figure and his words filled with pity, sad, resentment and scorn probably give Najeeb an insight about his dark future. In the masara the master treats his servant like a slave. The word 'freedom' is taken away from the dictionary of his life. Even his basic needs like food, water and sanitation are denied. Here we see the working class made rife for exploitation and oppression by denying its essential humanity. In chapter ten Benyamin draws an agonizing picture of Najeeb. In the consuming heat of desert, a man with an almost broken hand forced to gather a huge number of scattered goats, suffering the denial of even a drop of water by the master is nothing other than violence. Disregarding the plea of Najeeb to take him to the hospital, the Arbab asks him to milk the goats. This is just one incident. Throughout the novel we come across lot of such inhuman deeds in which the powerful master torture his enslaved subject. The master-slave relationship in the novel

reminds us of the barbaric colonizer's savagery towards the colonized subjects. Like colonial masters, Najeeb's Arbab cares only about his work, not about the discomforts of his subject.

A key element in diasporic studies is the examination of the identity crisis of the expatriates. Indian immigrants in gulf are also victims of this crisis. Primarily, it is not possible to get a citizenship from them within the host countries of gulf. Each of them lives there under the sponsorship of some Arab. Therefore, the fate of the migrant workers is depended on their sponsor's goodwill. The sponsor can deport them if unsatisfied. The domestic workers are not even addressed by their names. In 'Goat days' Najeeb is often addressed by his master as 'himar' or 'inti'. He is identified only as a swine or a low Indian. At another occasion the Arab calls the Indians as profligates. From this we can infer that the Arabs possess an air of superiority over Indians.

In the tenth chapter we see Najeeb getting out of his brand leather shoes and new clothes and stepping into the stinking boots and 'thobe' given by Arab. This marks this initiation of the transformation of his self. Just one day's life in the masara makes Najeeb to realize that there is no going back to his old world. "I am condemned to the conditions of this world. I have fallen headlong into the anxieties of it, and it is better to identify with the here and now" (Benyamin 95). Here the hapless protagonist becomes ready to give away his identity. As the novel progresses, we see Najeeb identifying himself with the goats. Finally, he transforms completely into a goat.

People from different regions of world, speaking different languages, reside in gulf countries. The migrant residents there struggle initially to adapt with different cultures and languages. Najeeb does experience this, but in a different way. He is helpless when forced to communicate in a language that he does not know. Communicating in gestures cannot satiate one's mind. Inability to communicate in Arabic is defeating in a region where knowing Arabic can prove the difference between respect and indifference. The disparate migrant workers who are unfamiliar with the language are forced to learn it. Some manage only a few phrases, hindered by a limited vocabulary, like Najeeb's. He does not know or understand anything that his master says and this frustrates him. "All of a sudden, all the grief I had been restraining gushed forth as tears" (Benyamin 65). Since he has no language to communicate, he makes tears the medium to convey his emotions. But the vicious Arbab irately neglects it. Here language pose a barrier to Najeeb in expressing his self.

"Nostalgia is the wistful longing for a happier or better time in the past" (nostalgia). All the expatriates have this yearning for their home land, because diaspora and homeland are inter related. In *Goat days* we see Najeeb longing for his motherland. "I do not know why, memories of homeland awakened in me. All my suppressed thoughts stirred and erupted like a volcano. I must escape from here. I must go home. I must reach my ummah. I must see my Sainu. I must see my Nabeel. I must see my land. I must see my dusty roads. I must see my river. I must see my canoe. I must see my rain. I must see my earth. At such moments, I could truly comprehend the meaning of nostalgia" (Benyamin 146). This craving of Najeeb makes him to hate his present condition more. It's a universal phenomenon. Nostalgia adds to the feeling of being othered.

Another painful feeling that haunts the migrant workers is loneliness. In the new land, they are often treated as aliens. Najeeb is alone in the billowing sea of sand. He is the only 'human being' in the masara. The scary figure is brutally killed by the Arab when he tries to escape. Najeeb is a lonely being with even no sense of time. He says "Being lonely is very depressing. Words twitched like silverfish inside me. Unshared emotions pulsated, bubbled and frothed at my mouth" (Benyamin 167). There is all chance for people in such condition to turn insane or die choking on words. Najeeb evades such a predicament by narrating stories to the goats. He even sleeps in the goat's masara, eats the husks given to them etc. His hobnob with the goats makes him one among them.

In the novel we also come across the plight of other sub characters which adds to the fact that migrant domestic labourers are being othered in the oil kingdom. One of such character is Hakeem. His Arbab's pass time includes flickering boiling water on his face, pulling his hair, poking stick into his backside, kicking his chest, dunking his head in water etc. Another character is Hameed, Najeeb's companion in the prison who works as a labourer in an Arab's farm. He has to work hard till night and undergo much abuse for too little compensation. In the novel we also see the goats being treated so cruelly. Young goats are not allowed to drink milk from their mother's teats. "The heart-breaking look of the mother goat" (Benyamin 108), when the new born Nabeel is pulled away from its teats is pitiful. The goats live in the masara like convicts in the prison whenever they get a favourable circumstance they are like "a nation in slavery walking to revolt suddenly" (Benyamin 118). The most unrelenting deed by the Arab towards the goats is that, except the selected few he-goats that are made to live among the she-goats, the rest of them are castrated and made into eunuchs.

Though the trapped migrant labourers try to adapt to their miserable situation due to helplessness, there is always a quest for freedom dormant in their mind. The people who are constantly othered will surely start to fight against it. They will however try to regain their lost self. Freedom from the hands of oppressor is not something that can be achieved so easily. It requires one to pass through tough situations and sufferings, for a long period of time. In *Goat days* Najeeb recounts about "a green carpet surfaced on the dry sand in the winter" (Benyamin 144). These plants that lie dormant beneath the barren land teaches Najeeb life's greatest lessons of hope. It gives him courage to wrestle with the desert and preserve his life. The strong desire to live and faith in God helps him to overthrow the blazing sun of the desert. The third part of the novel deals with the perilous desert trek of Najeeb, Hakeem and Ibrahim khadiri, which is even more dreadful than their plight in the masara. But this hardship and struggle finally brings in victory.

Female domestic labourers are the group most vulnerable to exploitation in gulf countries. They are double marginalized-initially as a migrant worker and then as a woman. The Malayalam movie *Gaddama* directed by Kamal also tells the life and struggles of expatriates. Gaddama is the Arabic term for domestic workers who come from other countries to do menial jobs in the Arab houses. More often these gaddamas are misapprehended as leading an easy life in the gulf by their kinsmen. But the hidden cries behind this name come out very rarely. Through the film *Gaddama* the diasporic writer K U Iqbal, script writer K. Gireesh Kumar and director Kamal take the audience to a long journey through the agonizing story of one such gaddama. It speaks for a thousand wretched female lives that are forced to conceal their identity behind a black veil. The movie tries to bring into light the female hard work that history has disregarded. The seed of this movie is a news item by K U Iqbal- 'Subaida Vilikkunnu' published in 'Malayalam News' eight years back. The movie basically delineates the inhuman torture encountered by female emigrants in the gulf.

As it is in the case of most female migrant labourers, Ashwathi, the protagonist in *Gaddama* also moves to gulf from the midst of a vast sea of unmanageable difficulties. She decides to migrate to the foreign land to save her family from ruining. But her new problems begin as soon as she lands up at the airport where she has to wait for one and half days for the sponsor to pick her up. In scene 1.A, we see Ashwathi sitting alone in the airport. It is evident from her appearance that she is frightened. She is companionless in the alien land. The sponsor makes her to wait there for one and half days. A lady who feels sympathy acquaints with her, thus breaking her loneliness. She too is a gaddama. After asking Ashwathi her name she says that "at the Arab's house, your name would be changed, they would call what they wish or gaddama" (*Gaddama*). From all these we can understand the sponsor's neglect and the subjugation that he imposes upon the woman. She is categorized as 'the servant'. She is the 'other'. The so called 'othering' becomes instrumental and the central character also becomes aware of her malign situation. She then transforms from the traditional saree and confines within the 'Abaya'. Also, she wipes out her bindi. These actions indicate the efface of her native culture and the stepping on into the culture of her master's land.

Once the migrants reach their host countries, they have to surrender their passports to the sponsors. From then onwards they are identified only as a worker under the sponsorship of an Arab. In a foreign country, without any documents of self-assertion, the female domestic workers find themselves under the charge of their employer. Many of them are even sexually abused by the males of the family. Each family in the Middle East consists of a good number of members so the work of such house maids can be arduous. They have to do cleaning, washing, cooking, tailoring, taking care of children and aged etc. They have to work hard till late in the night and wake up early in the morning. They are supposed to work like machines.

In the movie *Gaddama* we see that family who awaits Ashwathi in the foreign land have little regard for the 'Malabari' servant. They view the Indians with contempt. This is more evident in scene 20, when the Arab shouts at Rasaq, a social worker, saying that the Indians cannot be trusted. Here in the film Ashwathi becomes a subject to the villainous deeds of the family members. She has to encounter the terrific violence of the children to the lustful looks of the sponsor's father. In scene 12.A, we see him hit her back with his walking stick. She becomes an object of pleasure for them. She is denied freedom of movement, freedom of expression etc.

Saudi Arabia is not a secular nation. The government does not provide legal protection for freedom of religion. The public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited. Even then the non-Muslim migrant struggle a lot to practice their religion in great secrecy. But this is not possible for migrant domestic labourers since they reside inside the four walls of their master's house. In *Gaddama*, Ashwathi longs for her land, temple, prayers etc. She feels separated from her religion, language and culture in the foreign land. As it is with all emigrants, nostalgia hunts Ashwathi too. She ruminates about her ravishing days with her husband during the lonely nights at her master's house.

At home she agrees to work as a housemaid in Saudi Arabia for eight hundred Riyals a month. But Usman grabs couple of hundreds off the gaddama's pay. This shows the reprobate nature of humans towards fellow beings. Since she is alone, she is impotent to raise her voice against his deed. Later Usman and Fathima, the Indonesian maid who works with Ashwathi, get caught by the sponsor for having immoral relationship with each other. They are fiercely punished by the members of the house. Unable to withstand the torment, both of them flee the house at night. The impact of their run off falls on Ashwathi. The master inhumanly scourges her and locks her up in a room. Here the master does not even consider that she is a human being. She is treated like a slave. Even the females of the house have a hostile attitude towards her. In scene 28, we see Ayisha, sponsor's mother, placing hot iron box on Ashwathi's body to satiate her ire. The loud scream that comes out of her is unheard. The loneliness and brutal tortures depress her. Here, in the master we can witness a colonizer who uses imperial force over his colonized subject or the 'other'.

The emotionally tormented and physically abused Ashwathi, being unable to take it anymore determines to escape at any cause. She gathers courage and flees at night, without a passport, money or security. Usman, who assures to rescue her, deceives her. The never-ending sea of sand that awaits her outside is blazing hot during the day and searing cold during the night. In scene 39, we see the forsaken Ashwathi perceiving the dreadful wilderness. Her desiccated lips strongly suggest her helpless isolation. Terror and panic are visible on her face who is hopelessly lost in the hot sand dunes. She is then trafficked by an Arab and a Sudani and she is taken to their goat farm. There we come across the savage looking Basheer, an Indian expatriate who is destined to look after the goats in the desert. Basheer reminds us of Najeer in *Goat days*. He is brutally abused by his masters for rescuing Ashwathi from their dirty hands. Finally, in scene 58, we see that he too becomes a dead body in a mortuary under the tag "unknown Indian". This scene makes us to recall the second scene, where too we see the dead body of an "unknown Indian".

These dead bodies actually represent many such Indians who have lost their essence and identity in the scorching desert. Even death could not regain them from their deplorable condition.

Of all the characters in *Gaddama*, Razak is quite contradictorily an essentiality as well as a liability. Kunjikka in *Goat days* is such an amenable person. In scene 54, we can see Razak consoling Bharathan, the man who came to the aid of Ashwathi in the desert, who is imprisoned and seems hopeless. Razak says: "Have you not noticed, at times tender green plants sprouting in the day sand where we do not even expect green spot? Have you not noticed plants defeat the burring hot of sand? If such a tiny seed poses that much strength, what is there that humans cannot suffer?" (*Gaddama*). This dialogue reminds us of the small green plants that educe hope in Najeeb.

Goat days and *Gaddama* are not just artistic inventions. They are the chapters chiselled out from the book of life. We can find a lot of Najeebs and Ashwathis in our surroundings too. An article that came down in 'Metro Manorama' (Kannur edition) remarked the agonizing story of such migrant workers. One of it was the experience of a man named Mukesh from Cheemeni. "He went abroad hoping that his job was to look after babies in an Arab household. But when he reached there, he understood that he was defrauded by the agent. He was sent to a goat farm and had to do back breaking work under the master ship of a cruel Arab" (Joseph 1). His plight seems to resemble that of Najeeb's. In both *Goatdays* and *Gaddama* we discover the protagonists undergoing human right violation, identity crisis, language problem, nostalgia, serf like treatment by the masters, despondency etc. From all these we can apprehend that, the migrant labourers from India face 'othering' in the oil kingdom.

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